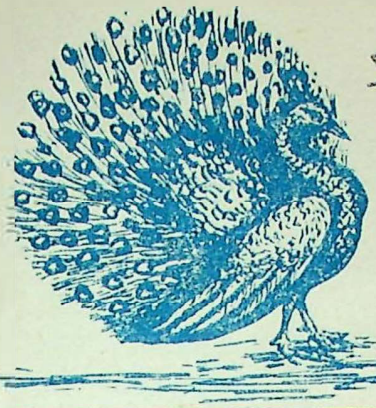

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MAYURA

Newsletter of the Bird Watchers' Club of Andhra Pradesh

Vol. 1 JULY, 1980 No.2

MAYURA WELCOMES CONSERVATIONISTS

'MAYURA' - the Newsletter of the Bird Watchers' Club of Andhra Pradesh - appeared amongst the conservation c conscious persons in April, 1980. The response to this modest beginning has been highly encouraging and it is hoped that 'MAYURA' will help develop a sense of appreciation of the conservation efforts of not just the avifauna but also of the Nature as a whole.

While 'MAYURA' was busy organising activities for the members of the club, the news reached that a Seminar on WILDLIFE RESOURCES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT is being organised jointly by the FAO, Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, Andhra Pradesh Forest Development Corporation, Andhra Pradesh Agricultural University and the Central Crocodile Breeding and Management Training Institute, Hyderabad from 7 - 11 July, 1980 in Hyderabad with delegates coming from several South East Asia countries. MAYURA considers this as a major development in the country and while welcoming the delegates to the Seminar wishes the function a grand success.

The second isssue of 'MAYURA' is being released commemorating the inaugural session of the Seminar and it is hoped that by so doing we are giving a glimpse of the activities of the club and MAYURA to an international audience. We also hope that with good wishes of all conservationists MAYURA will go ahead persuing the message of conservation to one and all.

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OBITUARY

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WITH PROFOUND GRIEF WE RECORD THE SAD DEMISE OF OUR ESTEEMED MEMBER SRI RAJA SURABHI VENKATA JAGANNADHA RAO, RAJA OF JATPROLE, MAHBOOBNAGAR DISTRICT,(A.P.) AT KOLHAPUR ON 23-6-1980. HE WAS AN EMINENT WILDLIFE AND BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER AND WAS RECIPIENT OF MANY AWARDS.

MAY HIS SOUL REST IN PEACE

SOLAR ECLIPSE-NOTES ON BEHAVIOURAL OBSERVATIONS OF WATER BIRDS:

8 15

S. ASHOK KUMAR, I.A.S.

After a rapid survey of some villages, Thummalagudem village in Ramannapet taluk, Nalgonda district was selected chiefly because the roosting and feeding grounds are within four furlongs facilitating easy coordination between the teams. In fact the roosting place was visible from our observation post.

Thummalagudem village is located 48 K.Ms from the line of total eclipse. The village tank fed by Musi river is a variatable haven for multitude of birds, notably the egrets and herons.

The team consisting of myself, Mr.V.Ramachandra Rao, Lecturer, Department of Zoology, Nagarjuna Government College and Mr.Y.Shyamsunder Reddy, B.Sc., Second Year Student of the same College moved to the village on 13th February and kept a close watch on the movement of Cattle egrets and located their roost in a grove comprising Babul Trees (Acacia Arabica) and Tamrind Trees (Tamarindus-Indicus). No nest's were found at the roosting place.

The next day evening the team, stationed at a vantage point on the tankbund, had a commanding view of both the feeding grounds, namely tank bed and paddy fields. When the digital watch blinked 5.40 PM, small groups of cattle egrets and little egrets started leaving the shallow tank and flew northwards towards their roosting place. Those feeding in the paddy fields also flew in the direction of the same roosting place. Some of the Cattle egrets directly landed on the branches while some circled over the grove twice or thrice

before landing. By 6.00 PM Pond herons started arriving at the roosting place. It is a mixed colony of Cattle egrets, Little egrets, Pond herons and Grey herons. No sooner they landed, the egrets started producing low grating croak and the crescendo increased gradually as more and more arrived to roost. The treetops looked over-crowded and some egrets were seen packing at each other. Some birds flew from one tree top to another before finally settling down. The pond herons with their characteristic neck-pulled-in posture were silhouetted against the crimson red sky. The quackle of egrets and Pond herons in chorus almost drowned the chatter of common mynahs and the screaming "Keek" of parrots. By 6.45 PM the noise of Pond herons subsided followed by mynahs. The egrets ranked last in ceasing their vocalisation. The bird chorus lasted for nearly 30 minutes before silence and darkness envoloped the scene.

On 15th, the next day we reached the roosting place by 5.29 A.M. and selected a vantage point for observation. Our stealthy movements and light focussing caused alarm in the colony for few seconds but it subsided as quickly as it was aroused. In the twilight we could perceive the profile of the birds perched on tree tops painted white. As darkness melted, the stars became dull. The first call of Cattle egrets was recorded at 5.49 A.M. At 6.01 A.M. the first call of mynahs were recorded. With the day breaking at 6.15 A.M. the entire seanary became clearly visible. The first egret took off at 6.17 A.M and flew directly towards the tank. At 6.19 A.M. the egrets flew off in small parties, some heading towards the green paddy fields and some towards the tank, their favourite feeding ground. By 6.35 A.M. the entire colony of egrets and herons had left the roosting place.

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We proceeded to our observation post erected in the foreshore of the tank and watched the following birds till mid-day.

1) Little Egrets. (Egretta Garzetta) and Cattle Egrets (Babulcus coromandus)

These birds have congregated at the centre of the water spread area dotted with reeds and vocalised for about 30 minutes. Later they spread out towards the tank margin for foraging. A few flew from one area of the tank to another.

2) Blackwinged Stilts. (Himantopus himantopus)

Several parties of blackwinged stilts, scattered along the water front were probing frequently into the muddy bottom with head and neck submerged at a steep angle and hind part of body sticking out like a duck "upending". The black wings, white head, neck and breast, and long crimson red legs render their identification easy. While flying low over the tank, one can see its blackwings weakly flapping, extended neck and the long legs trailing beyond the tail. Their vocalisation is comparatively less noisy than the egrets.

3) Darters. (Anhinga rufa)

Amidst the egrets were three darters, identified by their black bodies with grey streaks, whitish neck, long cormorant-like tail and pointed dagger bill. They were hunting singly and appear to be individualistic.

4) White-eyed Pochard (Aythya nyroca)

Yonder on the grassy tank margin, three rufous brown pochards landed, and few minutes later, they flew off flashing their conspicuous whitish wing bars.

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5) Little Stints (Calidris minutus)

Flocks of Little Stints flew swiftly in a compact mass near the water front. Their mottled brown bodies, blackish legs and bills with white underside visible as they turn and twist in unison were unmistakable.

6) Fantail Snipes. (Capella Gallingao)

Scattered among the blackwinged stilts and Little Stints were Fantail snipes probing into soft mud with their long slender bills near the tank margin.

7) Pond herons. (Ardeola gravii)

Several pond herons were feeding near the reeds and partly submerged rocks. While in flight, their glistening white wings, tail and rump flash into prominence.

8) Grey herons (Ardea cimerea)

Number of grey herons were found in the company of egrets, foraging. Their ashy grey body, pointed yellow dagger bill, S shaped neck and long legs help us in easy identification.

9) White breasted Water hen (Amauroruls phoenicurus)

Two pairs of White breasted waterhens were feeding near the reeds. As they moved and turned, their white breast and the erect stumpy tail showing the chest-nut coloured underneath were prominently visible.

10) Dabchicks (Podiceps ruficollis)

At the centre of the water spread area were about six dabchicks vanishing below thesurface quite rapidly and surfacing some distance away.

In the evening at 5.30 we reached the roosting place. Little egrets and Cattle egrets started arriving either singly or in small groups. Huge flocks arrived at 6.20 P.M. and circling over the area thrice, they alighted on the tree tops like swarms of locusts. Soon after, they indulged in low-key vocalisation. Parties of Pond herons perched on Babul trees to our right quacked occassionally. At 7.00 P.M. the vocalisation subsided, and the still silence that followed the dusk indicated that the birds have retired finally.

On the momentous Solar Eclipse day names 16th February,1980 we got up with great expectations and hopes and made to the roosting place by 5.00 A.M. The scene was still, calm and silent except our occassional whispers. We heard the first quacking call of Pond heron at 5.54 A.M. The twilight came at 5.56 A.M. and we could see the outlines of trees and the hillock in the back ground locally called Indrapala gutta. At 5.57 A.M. two or three egrets uttered deep harsh croak. There was occasional chirping and hooting of owls from the distant trees. As the twilight slowly advanced, the white tree tops were faintly visible. The egrets and Pond herons continued their occasional vocalisation. At 6.17 A.M. the Little egrets and later the Cattle egrets started to fly either singly or in groups of 2,3,4,7 etc. A minute later, a mixed flock of egrets and Pond herons took off. The graceful flight of egrets with slow winy beatings was clearly visible against the grey sky. At 6.19 A.M. another flock chiefly consisting of Pond herons and few egrets took off. A third group of Pond herons took to wings at 6.23 A.M. Small parties of pond herons were seen leaving at 6.27 A.M. and 6.29 A.M. By 6.33 A.M. the entire colony of birds has left for their favourite feeding grounds. The roosting place looked desolate. We recorded the actual sun rise between 6.40 A.M. and 6.44 A.M.

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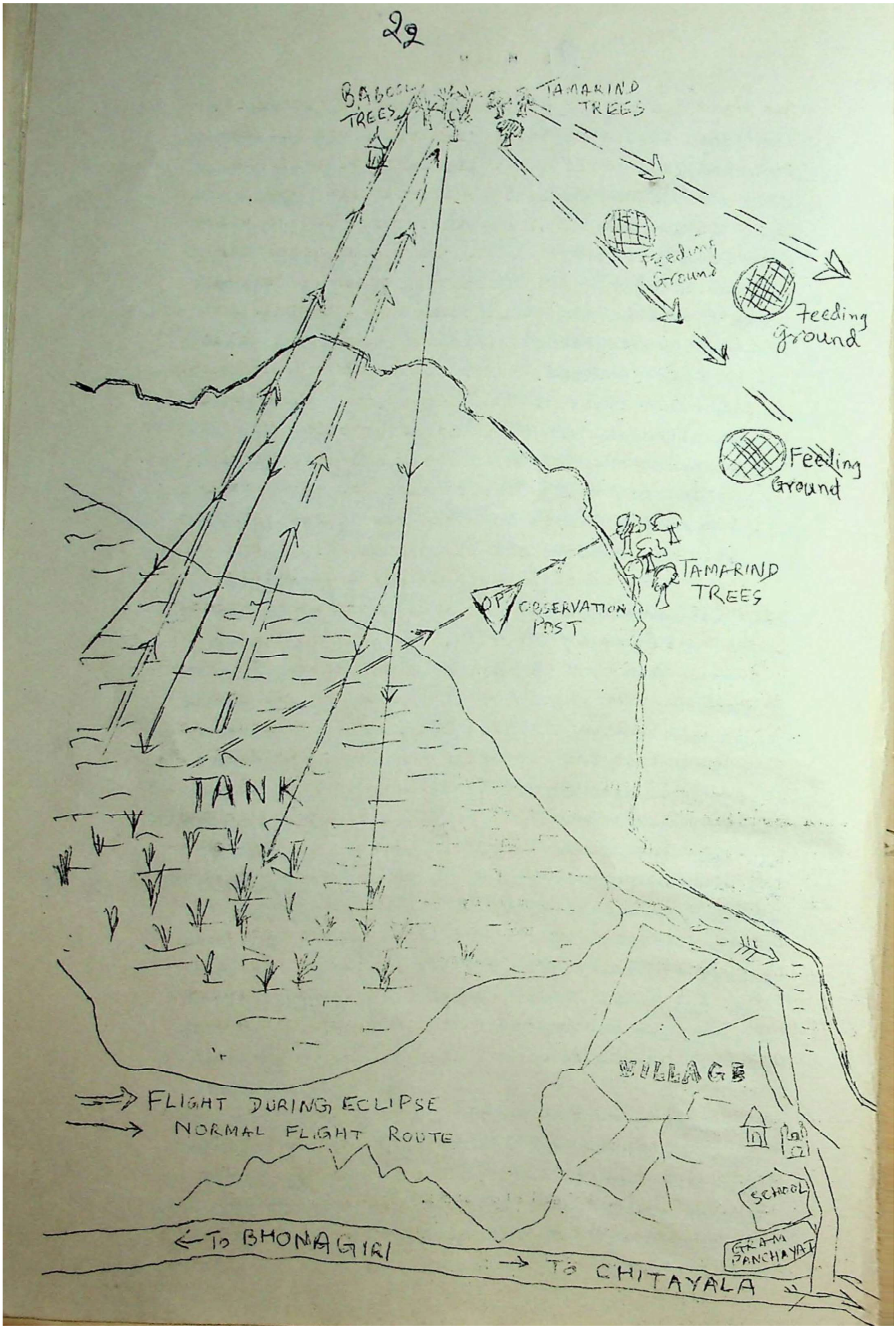
We reached the Observation Post by 7.12 A.M. and stationed ourselves very near the edge of the water-spread area. The sky was clear and the weather fine. The birds had collected in two groups at the southern end of the tank margin. The larger group consisted of Little egrets, Cattle egrets and a sprinkling of Grey herons. The smaller group consisting of 30 egrets had assembled near the reeds, about 150 yards from us. Since 7.12 A.M., they have been vocalising. At 9.36 A.M. the bigger group slowly thinned out spreading evenly towards North and West. At 11.10 A.M. a small party of Cattle egrets came from the direction of the fields and alighted on the Tamarind trees abutting the tank bund. A little later another group arrived and landed on the same trees. As the sun became severe, some Cattle egrets moved to the tank margin and rested while some flew off and landed on the Tamarind trees.

At 12 Noon, the mercury touched 89°F and by 12.30 P.M. it shot up to 90°F. Egrets standing in water were still feeding while those on the grassy tank margin continued to rest. At 1.00 P.M. the thermometer recorded 90.5°F temperature. Feeding by egrets, Pond herons, Little Stints, blackwinged stilts, Pentail snipes, White-breasted water hens continued. Egrets flew from the Tamarind trees towards the paddy fields while flocks of Little Stints flew low over water. The temperature rose to 92.5°F at 1.30 P.M. but came down to 90°F at 2.00 P.M. When the eclipse began at 2.30 P.M., mercury touched 92.5°F. The sky was still clear and there was no perceptiole change in the activity of Egrets and other water birds. At 3 P.M. the thermometer recorded 91.5°F. Little stints continued to migrate from one area of the tank to another. The temperature rose by .5°F at 3.10 P.M. and no behavioural changes and abnormal activity was noticed in Cattle egrets, Little egrets, grey herons and other birds. At 3.20 P.M. the eastern sky which was a

hue of light grey and crimson red became dull and the thermometer recorded 89.5°F. No changes were noticed in bird activity at 3.30 P.M. when the mercury touched 88.5°F. There was dawn twilight effect at 3.40 P.M. and the temperature abruptly came down to 86.5°F. No abnormal activity was noticed in the birds. At 3.45 P.M. the sky became duller and, near darkness abruptly enveloped the whole scene at exactly 3.46 P.M., when the thermometer recorded 84°F. There was wild animation and excitement in our Camp and all of us rushed out to witness the total eclipse, one of the mysteries of mother Nature. The sun was a black disc on fire. It was nature's grandest display of colours, a fantastic and spectacular event in one's life time.

The darkness was awesome and inspiring. Planets Venus and Mercury were distinctly visible in the firmament which was clear during the whole phase of totality. The effect or Corona was fantastic and beyond description. The egrets and herons abruptly took to wings, and flew in the direction of the roosting place. The groups flew directly to the Tamarind trees on the tank bund. It was unmistakable that the birds flew restlessly, but vocalisation was distinctly absent. We noticed crows overhead heading towards the village. All the villagers were staying indoors and no one dared to come out. No domestic animals were seen outside. The sun came came out in all brightness at 3.48 P.M. We could clearly see the Egrets and Herons alighting at the roosting place.

Our team member stationed at the roosting place reported that the parrots started chattering at 3.35 P.M. and at 3.47 P.M., flocks of Egrets and Herons arrived and circled over the area twice or thrice. While they were preparing to land, the


BABOOL TREES
TAMARIND TREES
Feeding Ground
Feeding Ground
Feeding Ground
TAMARIND TREES
OP
OBSERVATION POST
TANK
VILLAGE
FLIGHT DURING ECLIPSE
NORMAL FLIGHT ROUTE
SCHOOL
GRAM PANCHAYAT
← To BHONAGIRI
→ To CHITAYALA

Sun came out in all brightness causing confusion. One party landed on Babul tree tops, another on Tamarind tree while the third party alighted on the nearby paddy fields. While circling the birds looked restless. However, there was no vocalisation indicating fright. Two groups which circled over the place of roosting, returned to the shallow tank as sudden light bathed the whole landscape. The brilliance of light after total eclipse was as abrupt as the near darkness at the beginning of the eclipse. At 3.49 P.M. one group alighted at the roosting place. The thermometer recorded 86°F temperature at 4.00 P.M. Nearly half the birds which flew to their place of roosting were still visible as white dots on green tree tops. About 100 yards from our observation post near the sluice canal, we noticed three pairs of little Egrets fighting and making loud noice when attracted a small party of Egrets. We watched the Egrets jumping and pecking at each other. The fighting lasted nearly five minutes and all the birds flew away. A little later, they returned to the same place and reenacted the fight. At 4.28 P.M. We saw one party of egrets taking off from the roosting place and after circling returning to the paddy fields. Only very few remained at the roosting place.

During the actual period of total eclipse other birds like Blackwinged Stilts, Little Stints, Fantail Snipes, Teals, Dabchicks and White Breasted water hens remained in the tank and did not display any obnormal activity.

At 5.50 P.M. we reached the place of roosting which was empty. Pond herons were the first to start arriving either singly or in small parties at 6.06 P.M. A flock of egrets and grey herons arrived at 6.10 P.M. A second group of Pond herons

came at 6.16 P.M. At 6.30 P.M. a huge flock of Little Egrets and Cattle Egrets came from the tank feeding ground, circled and landed on the Babul trees. Soon after, they started vocalisation in low tone. Another flock arrived three minutes later followed by a second. The vocalisation increased in intensity. The last group landed at 6.38 P.M. and by 7.00 P.M. the birds became silent and settled down for the night.

We returned to the roosting place on 17th morning to continue our observations. At 5.49 A.M. we recorded the first call of cattle Egret. The low tone croaks mixed with occasional quacking of Pond Herons could be heard till 6.10 A.M. At 6.12 A.M. one Egret took off and flew southwards towards the tank followed by another. Three minutes later, the third, fourth and fifth took off. From 6.16 A.M. small groups of Egrets started off, one after another. Pond herons startd singly and in small groups at 6.25 A.M. and by 6.35 A.M. all thebirds had gone leaving the roosting place totally empty. Before, finally departing from our observation post, we had a last look at the multitude of water birds actively foraging in the shallow tank.

The following are the interesting sidelines of our observations of bird behaviour.

(a) Little Egrets are the most vociferous and while in company, indulge in occasional packing and fighting. Cattle Egrets are less noisy and quarrelsome. Pond herons have not been seen fighting.

(b) Most of the time, little Egrets and Cattle Egrets hunt in company. As the sume beoomes more and more severe, they fan out to the tank margin and indulge in occasional foraging.

(c) Grey Herons hunt in small groups and they have not been found fighting.

(d) Grey Herons, little Egrets and Cattle Egrets roost in mixed colonies in the same trees while Pond Herons roost separately.

(e) Egrets are the early risers followed by Grey Herons.

(f) Pond Herons wake up first but leave the roost last.

(g) Pond Herons arrive late and leave the roost late

(h) Pond Herons hunt individually but roost in a colony.

(i) It is strange coincidence that exactly at 6.17 A.M. the Egrets start flying singly or in small parties of 2,3,4,7 etc.

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DURING MARCH, 1980 :

The members of the club visited Shamirpet tank situated about 30 k.m. away from Hyderabad on March, 16 1980 to watch birds. More than 35 species of birds were bbserved. The members were delighted to observe Open-billed Storks, black winged stilts, grey herons egrets, blue winged teals, a single brown headed seagull, and harriers (pale and march) along with other birds. They have also visited drive-in deer park which harboured Red-winged Bush lark, Long-tailed grass warblers, Ashy crowns, and singing bush larks. The area was found to be very excellant place to watch many birds. Shamirpet is famous for partridges, though we could not observe any as it was already late in the morning when we arrived in park.

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